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ANNUAL REVIEWS

Annual Review of Psychology

Psychology of Culture Change: The Power of Situations Returns

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Annu. Rev. Psychol. 2027. 78:8.1–8.28

The *Annual Review of Psychology* is online at psych.annualreviews.org

https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-030226-025335

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Keywords

culture change, equality, diversity, physical proximity, storytelling, social networks, social capital

Abstract

Creating inclusive cultures with equal opportunity and belonging is a goal of most communities and organizations, but achieving that goal has been uneven at best. Many attempts at inclusive culture change have not worked, while others have backfired. One reason is that these attempts have exclusively emphasized individual efforts and underestimated the power of situations in nudging individuals' beliefs, behaviors, interactions, and relationships, which together create local culture. This article disaggregates the power of situations into four distinct types of situational forces, by integrating research from social psychology and adjacent disciplines, to illustrate how some situational forces shift beliefs, behaviors, social interactions, and relationships toward greater inclusion and equality while other situational forces move in the opposite direction. An important goal is to illuminate how individual beliefs and behaviors connect to higher-order changes in local cultures and to identify where research is lacking to chart a future research agenda.

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INTRODUCTION

Creating inclusive cultures with equal opportunity and belonging is a goal of most communities and organizations, but achieving that goal has been uneven at best. Many attempts at culture change toward greater equality have not worked, while others have backfired (Anand & Winters 2008, Bezrukova et al. 2016, Dobbin & Kalev 2022, Greenwald et al. 2022, Kalinoski et al. 2013). One reason is that actions targeting culture change have been guided by wrong assumptions about what is necessary to nudge human behavior and how individual-level actions translate into higher-order change (Dasgupta 2013, 2025). The goal of this article is to take a science-driven approach, using research from psychology and adjacent disciplines, to illuminate the mechanisms of culture change by zooming in on factors that move the needle toward inclusion and equality or away from it. I draw connections between individual beliefs and behaviors and higher-order changes in local cultures. Along the way, I identify where research is thin or lacking to chart a future research agenda.

WRONG ASSUMPTIONS GUIDING MANY CULTURE CHANGE EFFORTS

Individuals Are Assumed to Be Primary Agents of Change

The dominant focus in psychology is on the individual. Individuals are presumed to be agents of change whose actions trickle up, in unspecified ways, to change organizations and systems. The primacy accorded to individual agency is one reason social change interventions often start by appealing to individual hearts and minds. Take, for instance, various diversity trainings common in organizations such as multicultural education, cultural competence, and unconscious bias training

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(Dobbin & Kalev 2016, 2022; Hansen 2003; Newkirk 2019; Paluck & Green 2009; Paluck et al. 2021). These trainings assume that individuals drive change and underestimate the impacts of situational forces on mindsets, beliefs, and behaviors, belying a central lesson from social psychology about the power of situations to shape cognition, motivation, and behavior (Cialdini 2008, Johns 2006, Meagher 2019, Ross & Nisbett 1991, Shoda & Mischel 2000).

People's behaviors are driven by multiple situational forces—social norms and conventions, the roles they occupy, role-based behavioral expectations, and the opinions of others (Cialdini & Goldstein 2004, Fiske 1993, Fiske & Dépret 1996, Miller & Prentice 2016). These situational forces, often in the background, operate like wallpaper in a room, quietly nudging beliefs and behaviors in small cumulative ways. In many cases, this wallpaper was created generations ago by people in power to benefit themselves and others like them (DiMaggio & Garip 2012, Gilbert 2017, Giridharadas 2018, McCall & Percheski 2010, Mijs 2019). Over time it came to be seen as natural, not imposed nor coercive. People assumed others accepted the status quo and thus did not question it themselves (Cialdini & Trost 1998, Guinote 2008, Guinote et al. 2015). Even when people have private doubts about a long-standing practice or rule, their inner doubts may not convert into public questions or actions because of countervailing norms in the local situation.

Belief Change Is Assumed to Be a Prerequisite for Subsequent Behavior Change

Diversity and inclusion initiatives tacitly assume that the first step is to appeal to individual beliefs and attitudes. Yet, research reveals that while appeals to hearts and minds modestly increase self-awareness, knowledge, self-reported skills, and beliefs about diversity, these benefits decay quickly (Bezrukova et al. 2016). Short-term changes in beliefs and knowledge rarely translate into behavior change or changes in organizational decision-making or representation (Kalev et al. 2006, Kalinoski et al. 2013). Sometimes these programs backfire by creating resistance and resentment (Anand & Winters 2008). Only a few diversity-oriented education and trainings are grounded in science (Arslan et al. 2025, Carnes et al. 2015, Chang et al. 2019, Devine et al. 2017); most are not, which raises doubt about their causal efficacy (Paluck et al. 2021). In a nutshell, appealing to individual beliefs has not yielded behavioral change or culture change in organizations.

Facts Are Assumed to Be the Best Way to Raise Awareness of Inequality and Motivate Change

Educational programs in schools, universities, and workplaces that aim to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion often provide facts about organizational climate and representational diversity to point to inequities and motivate listeners to participate in change efforts. However, growing evidence shows that facts or statistics presented in non-narrative form are less persuasive than information presented as narratives. Several meta-analyses show narratives are much more successful in shifting attitudes, behavioral intentions, and actual behaviors than non-narratives, both immediately after information exposure and over time (Braddock & Dillard 2016, Choi et al. 2025, Oschatz & Marker 2020). Narratives persuade because they transport people into the life of the characters, where they vicariously experience the emotions and events the protagonists are going through. Psychological transportation leads audiences to adopt opinions consistent with the story's message (Green & Brock 2000, Moyer-Gusé 2008, Slater & Rouner 2002). Applied to the present context, a better strategy to motivate culture change toward greater equality would be to lean into stories that transport listeners and readers into the lives of others whose experiences are different from theirs and unfamiliar to them.

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KEY DEFINITIONS

Diversity

Diversity means ensuring that people in organizations, especially in positions of power, represent population demographics and heterogeneous perspectives (Gjesdal 2025, Jansen & Searle 2021, Jussim 2024, Mogilski et al. 2025).

Equity

Equity means ensuring equal opportunity, fair treatment, recognition, and mitigation of structural disadvantages (Braveman et al. 2018, Minow 2021, Unterhalter 2009).

Inclusion

Inclusion involves ensuring a welcoming and respectful culture, which may require special efforts for people marginalized because of their minority status (Corsino & Fuller 2021, Mogilski et al. 2025).

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Practices Typically Prioritize Identity-Based Representation with Less Attention to Relationships Across Groups and Power

Notwithstanding the nuanced definitions of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI; see the sidebar titled Key Definitions), when translated into practice, organizations have typically operationalized DEI in terms of increasing the demographic representation of minoritized groups and organizing affinity groups, activities, and safe spaces that gather people with minoritized identities to make them feel welcome and supported. Less common are organizational initiatives that operationalize DEI in terms of increasing cross-group relationships across lines of power, status, and identities to increase familiarity, understanding, empathy, and information exchange. As a result, an unintended consequence has been the creation of identity-based segregated siloes within organizations rather than the development of cross-group relationships, networks, and access to power.

FOUR TYPES OF SITUATIONAL FORCES SHIFT LOCAL CULTURES TOWARD EQUALITY OR AWAY FROM IT

The power of situations nudges individual beliefs, motivations, and behaviors and guides interpersonal interactions and relationships, which in turn shapes the local culture. Each nudge is small and rarely gets much attention, but over time these nudges have cumulative effects on culture, as described later. In this article I disaggregate the power of situations into four types of situational features (metaphorical wallpapers) that shape human behavior, using research from psychology, sociology, economics, political science, cultural geography, architecture, urban planning, and public health (see Dasgupta 2025).

First among those situational features is the physical design of the local environment (natural, built, or social environment) that, depending on its layout, influences who interacts with whom, relationship formation, and access to information networks. Second is knowledge of unspoken norms, informal rules, rule-bending, and behavioral skills to meet the demands of a local culture. Think of this as having a much-needed roadmap to pursue one's goals in complex organizations. Third are popular stories circulating through word-of-mouth, media, and books that elevate a set of values and ideologies. Stories offer interpretations of social reality, morals, and takeaways, and they guide listeners' future behaviors. When stories are repeated, the values embodied in

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them either normalize social hierarchy or question its legitimacy. The fourth and final type of situational feature is exposure to people in admired and respected roles. If those people come from homogeneous backgrounds and look different from the individual observing them, this signals that others who are different from this elevated set are less valued and their ability to achieve that high status is limited. In contrast, if these roles are occupied by people from diverse backgrounds, some of whom look similar to the individual observing them, it sends the message that upward mobility is possible for all.

Each type of situational feature interacts with the other types, amplifying their collective impact on the local culture. For example, the physical design of the built environment (e.g., towns, neighborhoods, workplaces, universities) can facilitate or limit social interactions among people across roles and statuses. When such interactions are facilitated, relationships form over time, and individuals previously not plugged into high-status roles learn important norms, rule-bending, and skills that are valuable for goal pursuit in that local culture. By exchanging informal stories, people also learn values and ideologies highly regarded in the local culture.

Physical Design of Local Environments Signal Status, Influence Relationship Formation, and Access to Information Networks

No physical space is neutral. Its layout, interior design, and choice of physical objects deemed to be culturally important signal who the space is for and who is admired and elevated. Moreover, as elaborated below, the layout of physical spaces (neighborhoods, houses, office buildings) places some people close together, making them more likely to find themselves in casual conversation compared to others who are spatially separated. Two important consequences flow from physical proximity. First, it influences similarities in tastes and preferences and self-initiated social sorting. Second, relationships that form from physical proximity open the door to new contacts and important information that others who are physical separated do not have access to. Once people notice and understand the impacts of their physical environments, it becomes possible to harness that knowledge to create inclusion for all and equality of opportunity.

Physical markers of status: portraits, monuments, houses, neighborhoods. We learn what greatness looks like by noticing who is respected and admired in our local culture, as reflected in concrete physical markers such as portraits displayed on the wall and on websites, monuments honoring individuals, and buildings named after people. Markers of greatness communicate high status. We assume that admired individuals must deserve respect, power, and wealth because of their special qualities. We then make a mental leap, inferring that these individuals' attributes are present among other members of their group. They are presumed to have the potential to become great, while members of other groups have less greatness potential (Dasgupta 2025).

An important consequence of visible markers of greatness is that they shape people's beliefs and behavior toward social groups. Research shows that when university campuses feature more monuments proclaiming the greatness of confederate leaders from the American Civil War, modern-day students on those campuses exhibit stronger implicit race preference for White over Black Americans compared to students on other university campuses with fewer or no confederate monuments, after statistically controlling for potential confounding factors (Vuletich & Payne 2019). Similarly, US counties that feature more historical monuments glorifying the confederacy during the American Civil War report more anti-Black hate crimes in the present day (Lantz et al. 2024). A similar pattern of findings emerges when visible markers of greatness are not monuments but rather people occupying respected roles—like faculty—in that university community. The higher the proportion of White faculty relative to faculty of color on a university campus, the more students on that campus exhibit stronger implicit pro-White preference (Vuletich & Payne 2019).

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The status associated with social groups also affects the value accorded to property owned by group members. Black-owned homes are consistently appraised at lower monetary values than comparable White-owned homes in similar neighborhoods in the United States (Perry et al. 2018). The subjective nature of home appraisals leaves room for racial stereotypes to bias appraisers' judgments of property value. Consider a study in which individuals in the United States were asked to evaluate a house for sale based on a property profile that included photographs of the house and a description of its amenities (Bonam et al. 2016). In one photograph, casually positioned, was a family portrait of the current owners. All participants saw the same home profile, but the photograph was systematically varied to show either a Black family or a White family. Compared to participants who saw a picture of a White family, those who saw the Black family inferred that the house was less valuable and that the neighborhood had lower-quality schools and municipal services, had less access to retail and financial institutions, and was less safe. These results show how racial status biases inferences about property value, preventing Black homeowners from growing wealth through home equity at the same rate as White homeowners. Other studies show that racial stereotypes include assumptions about neighborhood disorder. When neighborhoods have more Black residents, individuals in the United States, regardless of their own race, perceive more neighborhood disorder, even after objective markers of disorder are statistically controlled (Sampson & Raudenbush 2004). Moreover, observing a critical mass of Black residents leads White home buyers to infer lower property values and to offer lower bids regardless of the neighborhood's socioeconomic status (Krysan et al. 2009).

The racial composition of neighborhoods also affects people's preferences for public versus private amenities. When shown two maps of a fictitious city, one racially diverse and the other racially homogeneous, White participants indicated a preference for sending their children to a private school in the former case and to a public school in the latter (Anicich et al. 2021). Similarly, they preferred to limit access to the city's social club to members only in the racially diverse city and to leave it open to the public when the city was racially homogeneous. In sum, when imagining living in diverse city, White Americans tended to avoid interracial interactions in schools and social institutions (see the sidebar titled How Individual Behaviors Lead to Structural Inequality in Physical Environments).

HOW INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIORS LEAD TO STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY IN PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENTS

Monuments and portraits that present White American figures as heroes in history function as situational wallpapers that prime viewers to infer that history shows White superiority. In contemporary life, the racial composition of neighborhoods activates stereotypes about their desirability, which in turn affect the value attached to neighborhoods and homes. Many individual actions accumulate to magnify wealth disparities and residential segregation. Appraisers estimate property values, which affect home prices. Buyers and renters make constrained choices about where to live and the price they can afford, thus influencing demand and home prices. Sellers, landlords, and rental agencies select among prospective buyers and tenants. Individuals in local governments issue zoning laws to determine where to locate amenities and services (e.g., parks, parking, libraries, grocery stores) and whether and where to allow polluting land uses (e.g., factories and highways). Affluent individuals and organizations control and invest in local properties, deciding whether a building becomes a liquor store or a grocery store and how much money to put into upgrading it (Anderson & Plaut 2012). These are examples of how individual actions cumulatively contribute to structural inequality.

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Physical proximity builds relationships. When people are in close physical proximity to one another, relationships form organically. If one person has valuable information that gets shared with others in their network, this equalizes access to information and opportunities. In contrast, when people are segregated from one another, relationships are harder to form. If some people acquire valuable information that is often not transmitted to others who are not in their informal network. As a result, some people are in the know while others are left in the dark.

Because where people live and who is around them is the foundation of early relationships, residential segregation is an early source of homogeneous social networks (Massey & Denton 1998; Musterd 2005; Peach 1996, 1999; Simpson 2004). One study compared residential segregation in the United States and Great Britain and found that Black people are more likely to live together in segregated neighborhoods in the United States than in Great Britain. In contrast, South Asians are more likely to be segregated from other groups in Great Britain than in the United States (Iceland et al. 2011). The authors conclude that the most economically disadvantaged group in each country is also the most residentially segregated: Black people in the United States and South Asians in Great Britain.

Beyond neighborhoods, the spatial design of cities and towns also shapes social networks and inequality. Physical barriers, such as highways, railroad tracks, fences, and walls, have been used throughout history to create segregation. When neighborhoods are divided by highways, residents lose social connectivity to other neighborhoods (Aiello et al. 2025), they develop a sense of group distinctiveness from people living on the other side of the physical barrier (Roberto & Korver-Glenn 2021), and inequality between these communities grows over time (Archer 2025, Tóth et al. 2021, Weiwu 2024).

Physical proximity influences tastes, preferences, and social sorting. Initial relationships based on physical proximity in neighborhoods and schools are supplemented by later relationships based on choice of hobbies, social clubs, religious organizations, volunteer activities, college, and place of work as well as preference for online social networking relative to in-person interactions. The friendship networks of people who are working-class, rural, and older tend to be more local, whereas those of people who are economically affluent, urban, and younger are more distributed and varied (Bennett et al. 2001, Li et al. 2003). People who occupy the same social circle adopt shared lifestyles and tastes. Familiarity leads to comfort and trust. In contrast, unfamiliarity between different social circles reduces comfort and trust and increases social distance. As networks become homogeneous and share common cultural lifestyles, people begin to share resources mostly with others in their network. These dynamics amplify benefits for people within resource-rich social networks, increasing their advantage relative to others in resource-poor networks (Bourdieu 1984, DiMaggio & Garip 2012).

Physical proximity influences network access and network returns. Relationships born out of physical proximity sometimes translate into future career opportunities. Studies show that students randomly assigned to be roommates or hallmates in their first year of college tend to end up in similar types of jobs upon graduation. A strong correlation is observed between students' employment and salary upon graduation and the average outcomes of peers who shared the same first-year campus housing, suggesting that the contacts, advice, and information students get from their first-year hallmates and roommates yield employment benefits four years later (Marmaros & Sacerdote 2002).

People's networks vary in social capital. Finding jobs, professional development opportunities, and leadership roles often depends on the quality of one's social networks (Granovetter 1995, Lin 2002). People who are more educated, economically comfortable, or associated with elite institutions are privileged in two ways. First, they have greater network access: They know more people in

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HOW INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN NETWORK ACCESS AND NETWORK RETURNS LEAD TO STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY

While individual effort to get ahead is important, it often gets swamped by situational forces. Who someone knows, what resources their contacts have, and whether their contacts are willing to help constitute an invisible wallpaper. Network connections play a powerful role in advancing some people faster than others. Individual efforts to expand one's network cannot overcome inequality in network access, returns, and networking skills. Referrals from networks may override individual merit, helping some people move ahead even if they are not the most qualified candidates. Network access and network returns are rooted in relationships formed through proximity in neighborhoods, at school, in college, at work, or through social activities. Private businesses, universities, and social clubs magnify inequality through referral policies or practices that incentivize current employees or organization members to recommend people in their networks for jobs or membership. Employee-referred candidates get preferential treatment. Because of network homophily, employees are more likely to refer others like themselves. This is how individual actions become building blocks of organizational inequality. When multiple organizations act the same way, structural inequality results.

strategic organizational roles who have useful information, contacts, and other resources. Second, they have higher network returns: Their contacts are more willing to share useful information and actively mobilize personal resources to assist them by making referrals or coaching them. Differential advantages in network access and network returns create inequality in awareness of professional opportunities, employment access, and social mobility. A nationally representative survey found that people in all-White male networks received 103% more job leads than others in networks without any White men, whereas people in all-female networks received 47% fewer job leads than others in all-male networks (McDonald 2011). When women and people of color get inside mostly male networks or mostly White networks, they acquire more contacts with social capital.

Gaps in network returns also result in group disparities in employment outcomes. In a nationally representative study of job seekers, White job seekers were more likely than Black job seekers to know someone in the companies to which they had applied (Pedulla & Pager 2019). Moreover, people connected to White job seekers were more likely to put in a good word on their behalf to potential employers than those connected to Black job seekers, which accounted for 15.5% of the race gap in job offers among network-based applications. While using one's network yielded more job offers than formal applications for all job seekers, this effect was twice as strong for White compared to Black job seekers (see the sidebar titled How Individual Differences in Network Access and Network Returns Lead to Structural Inequality).

Leveraging physical proximity for social justice. Bringing groups together through physical proximity is the foundation of intergroup contact theory, which proposes that positive and meaningful interactions among people from different groups can reduce outgroup prejudice (Allport 1954). Close contact is more likely to work than more distant contact (Davies et al. 2011, Paolini et al. 2021, Tropp et al. 2017), an effect mediated by reduced anxiety and greater empathy (for reviews see Pettigrew et al. 2011, Tropp & Dehrone 2023). The impact of intergroup contact is optimal when (*a*) there is equal status among interacting individuals, (*b*) interactions have the potential to develop into friendships, (*c*) interaction partners share common goals, and (*d*) support from authority figures legitimizes intergroup contact (Pettigrew 2021). This theory has inspired numerous interventions bringing together members of different groups through summer camps, work teams, sports teams, integrated schools, military units, public housing, and so on, and it

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led to the general finding that desirable intergroup outcomes can often be achieved when contact programs are designed and implemented carefully, even in conflict and post-conflict contexts, with some caveats (Al Ramiah & Hewstone 2013, Andersson & Dehdari 2021, Deutsch & Collins 1951, Faibish et al. 2025, Finseraas et al. 2019, Grady et al. 2023, Mousa 2020, Stouffer et al. 1949, Wilner et al. 1952; for reviews, see Pettigrew et al. 2011, Tropp & Morhayim 2023).

Sometimes positive intergroup contact occurs organically in diverse residential neighborhoods. One study found that Black, Latino, and White residents living in racially diverse neighborhoods harbored fewer negative stereotypes about outgroups and felt less threatened by immigration than other residents in the same city who lived in racially homogeneous neighborhoods (Oliver & Wong 2003). Even after statistically controlling for participants' ideal neighborhood preference, the authors found that if participants happened to be living in a racially diverse neighborhood, they expressed fewer stereotypes and felt less anxious about engaging with groups different from theirs. Neighborhood diversity mattered more than city-wide diversity, suggesting that physical proximity was a key ingredient that increased the likelihood of bumping into neighbors of different backgrounds and interacting with them (see Faibish et al. 2025 for parallel findings from mixed Jewish-Palestinian cities in Israel, and Jahoda & West 1951 for conceptually similar findings from racially proximal public housing in the United States during the Jim Crow era).

Complementary evidence on the power of spatial proximity come from studies showing that people living in regions with less race-based residential segregation exhibit less implicit race bias at an aggregate level (Vuletich et al. 2026) and are less likely to implicitly stereotype Black people as aggressive (Sadler et al. 2021, Somo et al. 2021). Other studies show how the design of the built environment affects social interaction (Bulger et al. 2023, Dixon 2001). When cities locate public shopping centers and other public amenities between high-income and low-income neighborhoods, residents of those neighborhoods that differ in social class have more exposure to each other compared to residents of cities where such amenities are located within economically segregated areas (Nilforoshan et al. 2023). Greater exposure across social class lines is associated with less implicit race bias among White individuals (Primbs et al. 2025). This is exemplified by the new urbanism movement in city planning, wherein public spaces are designed to make them compact and walkable to encourage social mixing. One version of new urbanism involves neighborhoods that intermix single-family homes, rentals, and affordable housing to bring together people from different backgrounds (Bulger et al. 2023, Dixon 2001) in contrast to low-density neighborhoods where foot traffic is sparse and spontaneous interactions among strangers are rare (Jacobs 1961).

Beyond the neighborhood context, several experiments involving college housing show how sharing living quarters with roommates from different backgrounds increases empathy, cognitive flexibility, academic achievement, institutional belonging, and cooperation for both majority and minority students. Many US colleges and universities have adopted randomized roommate policies in the first year of college to increase the probability of pairing roommates from different backgrounds. To work smoothly, roommate assignment policies need to pair students who have similar daily living habits and ensure roommate assignment is accompanied by intergroup dialogue and reassignment programs if needed (Boisjoly et al. 2006, Gaither & Sommers 2013, Hudson 2018, Page-Gould et al. 2008, Shook & Fazio 2008, Tsai & Trinidad 2025; for a review, see Gaither et al. 2025).

The physical design of an environment—its location, architecture, and interior design—communicate who the place is for. When the ambiance of a place caters to people's needs and interests, it increases their motivation to approach that place and linger. Studies show the décor of technology-oriented workspaces conveys clues about its culture, values, and norms, which in turn affect young women's interest in computer science education and careers (Cheryan et al. 2009). Women students felt a greater sense of belonging in, and expressed more interest in, computer

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science when exposed to workspaces with gender-neutral décor compared to masculine décor. They appeared unaware that the room's ambiance had affected their choices.

While there is a large body of sociological research showing how physical environments shape social networks and preferences, psychological research on the role of physical spaces on beliefs, behaviors, norms, and relationships is scattered, lacking a unified theoretical framework (Meagher 2019). A productive avenue of future research would be to develop a theory that offers a taxonomy of social contexts—outdoor spaces (e.g., neighborhoods, parks), indoor spaces (e.g., building layouts), technology-enabled virtual spaces, and physical symbols (portraits, monuments)—with testable hypotheses about the various ways in which each type of social context (physical or virtual) is expected to influence cross-group interactions, friendships, familiarity, understanding, empathy, trust, choices, and behavior, with proposed psychological mechanisms.

Knowledge of Behavioral Norms, Rules, and Rule-Bending Helps Navigate Local Cultures

Sometimes people walk into a new environment and quickly understand the local norms and etiquette. Others walk into the same environment, feel lost, and don't know how to behave. This is the experience of cultural match versus mismatch, respectively (Stephens et al. 2014). Navigating social environments requires awareness of their norms and conventions, knowledge of unspoken rules, understanding of which ones are bendable, and behavioral dexterity to navigate their intricacies to achieve one's goals. Think of this as knowing the roadmap to a maze. This is the second of the situational features (or metaphorical wallpapers) mentioned above. Knowing this roadmap helps individuals navigate the environments of school, college, work, and social life with less friction and to accomplish their goals. Others who lack the roadmap get lost, miss opportunities, and fall behind.

Cultural mismatch is the friction that arises when individuals' knowledge, values, and communication style clash with those of dominant institutions, workplaces, or social settings, leading to miscommunication, stress, and performance gaps (Stephens et al. 2014). While cultural match makes goal pursuit smooth, mismatch increases the risk of missing opportunities, bumping into roadblocks, falling behind, and feeling alienated. This is often the experience of low-income people trying to navigate academic and professional institutions that are typically built on upper-middle-class social norms. Understanding these norms and the appropriate way to operate within a cultural system is necessary for upward social mobility.

Cultural match versus mismatch affects navigation of educational institutions. A 20-year qualitative study illustrates this well (Lareau 2011, 2015). Lareau followed a cohort of 10-year-old children and families (with equal numbers drawn from middle-class, working-class, and poor backgrounds) to assess children's life outcomes at age 30. Three gaps in cultural knowledge emerged that prevented poor and working-class children from getting ahead compared to their middle-class counterparts. First, middle-class families knew the unspoken norms, opportunities, and impediments at school and college and used that knowledge to move up, whereas working-class and poor families did not have that informal knowledge, resulting in missed opportunities and barriers. Second, middle-class parents and children felt entitled to ask for help, whereas working-class and poor children felt uncomfortable doing so, mostly relying on themselves. Adjacent research calls this hard independence, which involves self-reliance, emotional toughness, and resilience and is common in working-class culture in the United States; this is contrasted with soft independence in middle-class and affluent culture that involves expressive and proactive help-seeking (Chang et al. 2020). Third, middle-class children understood that rules can be bent and negotiated accommodations and exceptions more than their working-class and poor counterparts. By age 30, individuals

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with a middle-class background were more likely to have high-quality, secure jobs compared to their peers from working-class and poor families.

Social class inequality is often reproduced by key social institutions, like universities, that are organized around middle- and upper-class expectations of independence and assertiveness (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990, Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). In one study, when university leaders from elite US institutions were asked what skills students were expected to learn in college, they overwhelmingly selected independence-oriented skills—learning to express oneself, becoming a leader, solving problems on one's own, and working independently (Stephens et al. 2012). Only two interdependent skills made the list—learning to work with others and doing collaborative research. Values of independence align with middle- and upper-middle-class family culture. Well-off parents cultivate independence in their children by giving them lots of choice and control, making the transition to college smooth. In contrast, working-class and poor families teach interdependence. Given economic stress, these parents expect their children to be responsive to family and community needs, follow the rules, and recognize their place in the family. The friction between home-grown values of interdependence and the ubiquity of independence at university reduces feelings of belonging among working-class college students, which in turn is associated with negative emotions, stress, and lower grades (Phillips et al. 2020, Stephens et al. 2012).

Cultural match versus mismatch affects career entry and navigation. Social class affects candidates' behavior in job interviews, especially confidence and self-presentation, which in turn influence observers' evaluations (Chua 2022, Kraus et al. 2019, Sharps & Anderson 2021). In one study, soon-to-graduate business school students from varying social class backgrounds participated in mock job interviews and were evaluated by hiring managers and other observers. Evaluators erroneously judged working-class interviewees to be less competent and less socially skilled than middle- and upper-middle-class candidates even though the two groups performed equally well on objective measures of competence collected earlier, and, in fact, working-class interviewees were more socially skilled. The results revealed that these erroneous judgments occurred because upper-middle-class interviewees appeared more confident than their working-class peers, and confidence was used as a proxy for presumed competence by hiring managers and other observers. Converging evidence comes from another study in which hiring managers at top technology companies relied on job candidates' confident communication styles as indicators of their fit in the company (Chua 2022).

Social class and racial gaps in knowledge of the hidden rules of job search have also been documented (Chua 2022, Pedulla & Pager 2019). While young people from working-class backgrounds search for jobs through conventional means (e.g., attending career fairs, applying online), their peers from affluent backgrounds first lay the groundwork by networking first: seeking out professional and personal contacts to get advice and referrals before formally applying for jobs (see the sidebar titled How Individual Behaviors Due to Cultural (Mis)match Lead to Structural Inequality in Social Mobility).

Leveraging networks for social justice. Reducing cultural mismatch begins with engaging a few influential individuals who occupy central roles, formal or informal, within the community or organization and are connected to many others. Influential individuals are not necessarily those who talk a lot. Rather, they listen a lot, actively seeking out the opinions of a diversity of people to whom they are connected (Corazzini et al. 2012). People in workplaces are more successful at persuading others, shifting norms, building coalitions, and achieving important goals if coworkers perceive them to be good at listening to alternate points of view and feel comfortable self-disclosing to them (Ames et al. 2012, Brands & Rattan 2020). Those who occupy central roles in a network are also influential as informal mentors and advice-givers. Junior colleagues seek advice from them

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HOW INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIORS DUE TO CULTURAL (MIS)MATCH LEAD TO STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY IN SOCIAL MOBILITY

Cultural (mis)match reproduces structural inequality in three ways. First, cultural match makes it easier for well-off youth to navigate college and earn their degrees, increasing their economic security. In contrast, cultural mismatch raises barriers and increases attrition risk before degree completion for working-class youth, jeopardizing their economic mobility. Such differential outcomes reproduce social class disparities in education, income, and health (Case & Deaton 2021, Tamborini et al. 2015). Second, cultural match may shape the expectations of college admissions officers, who may be attuned to compatibility between applicants' self-presentation and institutional norms. Their decisions may therefore contribute to wealth-based disparities in college access (Haveman & Smeeding 2006). Third, hiring decisions for white-collar jobs are shaped by cultural match, as shown by research finding that hiring managers erroneously use candidates' confidence to infer their intelligence and social skills. Small errors in hiring and admission decisions accumulate to reinforce the class-based segregation of people in different types of jobs within organizations.

about how to handle workplace bias and gain access to opportunities because they see them as reliable sources of information and resources (Brands & Rattan 2020, Ibarra & Andrews 1993). Their advice shapes the opinions and experience of advice-seekers in terms of workplace quality, fairness, and career advancement (Lamertz 2002).

If well-connected individuals in central roles interact with, and listen to, the experiences of disadvantaged people, they are likely to become aware that the tacit norms and expectations in the local context that they know so well are not known to those with less social capital. These gaps in knowledge of institutional roadmaps result in opportunity gaps. Closing these gaps requires connectors first to listen and understand and then to relay what they learn to decision-makers to persuade them of the need for new approaches to increase equality. A productive direction of future research would be to integrate psychological and sociological approaches, combining psychological interventions informed by cultural mismatch theory that target individual experiences with sociological interventions that leverage central nodes in groups.

Stories Explain Social Reality, Normalize Ideologies, and Support or Question Inequality

Stories are the third type of situational feature that shapes social reality. Listeners process narratives differently from nonnarrative messages (Slater & Rouner 2002). Whereas nonnarrative messages are processed via either a central route (claims are scrutinized and evaluated critically) or a peripheral route (claims are absorbed casually and superficially), narratives transport the audience into someone else's world where they take on the character's perspective and vicariously experience events that may be far from their own reality (Gerrig 1993, Green & Brock 2000, Green et al. 2004, Moyer-Gusé 2008). The experience of transportation gives audience members insight into the reasons for someone's actions. More than nonfiction, stories feel personal because they activate self-knowledge that gets woven into the narrative (Mar & Oatley 2008).

Through stories, audiences also identify emotionally with the protagonists, feel empathy, and start to adopt their views as their own (Busselle & Bilandzic 2008, Hoeken et al. 2016). Experiments show that reading fiction (versus nonfiction or nothing at all) increases readers' ability to understand what other people are thinking (mentalizing) and to enter others' emotional experience (empathizing) (Mar 2011). Beyond specific protagonists and plotlines, stories frame social reality, provide takeaways, and amplify some values and ideologies more than others. Some stories

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normalize inequality while others question its legitimacy. By shaping listeners' understanding of what is normal and right, stories motivate future behavior.

Stories can justify inequality. Narratives conveyed through mass media play an important role in constructing reality by "selecting and highlighting some elements of reality and suppressing others, in a way that constructs a story about a social problem, its causes, its moral nature and its possible remedies" (Entman 1995, p. 142). A popular story in US culture is that success requires innate talent, hard work, and making good choices. The corollary is that failure comes from less talent, less hard work, or poor choices. Both stories elevate independence, personal responsibility, and individual control, implying that people who succeed do so solely because of personal merit and deservingness, whereas those who stumble or fail do so solely because of personal demerit and undeservingness. Suppressed from this narrative are external factors that determine success and failure: access to resources and information-rich networks of people, knowledge of unspoken social norms, and luck.

Research investigating how the media tell stories about social class and economic mobility reveals three ways in which class inequality is depicted. First, media stories portray a disproportionately large number of protagonists who are upper-class, with narratives told from their perspective, while poor and working-class characters are scarce (Bishop 2008, Bullock et al. 2001, Entman 1995, Mantsios 1995). Second, in terms of personality traits, poor characters are often portrayed as lazy, unintelligent, uninterested in education, sexually irresponsible, criminal, and dependent upon the state (Kelly 2010, Kendall 2011, Rose & Baumgartner 2013). In contrast, middle-class characters are portrayed as virtuous (Kendall 2011, Mantsios 1995, Skeggs 2004), and upper-class characters are portrayed as admirable, generous, and caring (Kendall 2011). Third, the narrative arc of many mass media stories fits the American Dream wherein opportunities are available to anyone who works hard and plays by the rules, downplaying the structural factors that block opportunities for some while providing them for others (Bullock et al. 2001, Hochschild 1995, Kendall 2011, Mantsios 1995).

Children encounter stories explaining inequality from a young age. One study examined how children's movies represent social class through characters occupying various class positions, life conditions, and opportunity structures (Streib et al. 2017). They found that leading characters were disproportionately wealthy (57%) rather than working-class or poor (20%). Although the hardships of poor and working-class characters were presented in children's movies, they were portrayed as equivalent to those of rich characters; their jobs were characterized as fun, free, and having more autonomy than those of upper-class characters; and their social position was depicted as secure while upper-class positions needed defense against threats.

Two-thirds of children's movies had narrative arcs that fit the American Dream, where characters' effort, selflessness, and playing by the rules determined their ascent up the social class ladder, even when they began in poverty. In contrast, characters who were immoral, self-centered, did not play by the rules, or harmed others slipped down the social class ladder or died (Streib et al. 2017). For children watching these films, the takeaway is that personal traits, not social class origin, determine where one ends up in life. Only 10% of children's movies showed the class hierarchy as rigged, where hard work, morality, compassion, and ambition were not rewarded, and evil protagonists rationalized poverty and exploitation as justifiable. Even there, the oppressed characters were portrayed as challenging the legitimacy of evil protagonists, overturning the class hierarchy, and restoring order by the end of the movie.

Missing from existing research are studies showing clear connections between the stories told through mass media and their impact on viewers. One exception is a multinational study on how song lyrics describe the causes of economic inequality and their association with listeners'

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beliefs (Carbone & Mijs 2021). Using the top 200 songs streaming across Europe in 2017, these researchers found that song lyrics that touched on economic inequality provided either individual or structural explanations for it. Individual explanations emphasized "rags to riches" or "bragging rights," whereas structural explanations emphasized "struggle" or "omnipresent risks." When country-level music popularity data were linked to individuals' beliefs about meritocracy within those countries, the results showed that in countries where songs describing inequality as driven by individual merit were most popular, the residents believed strongly that upward mobility requires individual agency and personal responsibility. In contrast, in countries where songs describing inequality as structurally caused were most popular, the residents believed strongly that upward mobility is often outside of individual control. These intriguing findings are correlational and do not show a clear causal connection between music lyrics that listeners hear often and their effect on their beliefs. However, they present new hypotheses for future research to test: Might stories told through music have a causal effect in shaping listeners' personal beliefs?

Stories can arouse empathy, reduce bias, and increase acceptance. Stories also have positive impacts on listeners' understanding of social reality and can reduce outgroup bias through relatability and empathy. In one study, US participants were randomly assigned to watch multiple episodes of one of two TV sitcoms: *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, about a Muslim community with characters who were personable and relatable, or *Friends*, about a group of young adult friends—all White and non-Muslim—who were also personable and relatable. Viewers who watched *Little Mosque* expressed more favorable attitudes toward Muslims after watching multiple episodes than viewers who watched *Friends*. Positive sentiments endured 6 weeks later and were associated with greater identification with Muslim characters (Murrar & Brauer 2018).

Stories that educate viewers about a social issue wrapped up in an absorbing plot, called entertainment-education, are accessible on multiple media platforms (Braddock & Dillard 2016; Moyer-Gusé 2008; Murrar & Brauer 2018, 2019). At one level they tell stories of particular characters, their relationships, experiences, and dilemmas. At a meta level, they convey lessons about social issues without being explicit: Muslim people are like you; they could be your friends. Entertainment-education reduces our sense of being manipulated, which makes us more receptive to messages in the plot (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi 2010). The cognitive and emotional demands of a story leave viewers with less motivation and mental resources to critique an issue they may disagree with, which makes entertainment-education an effective tool for persuasion.

Stories are powerful even when conveyed in a compact form. One study created short biographical sketches of admired and famous individuals who were gay or lesbian, describing their accomplishments and contributions and mentioning their sexual orientation only in passing (Dasgupta & Rivera 2008). A community sample of heterosexual participants was randomly assigned to read either these life stories or stories about nature. Those who read gay and lesbian life stories exhibited less implicit antigay bias and were more willing to vote for policies protecting gays and lesbians from employment and housing discrimination, as well as marriage equality policies at a time when same-sex marriage was illegal in the United States, compared to the control group. Participants who had no prior contact with gay or lesbian people experienced the biggest benefits, suggesting that media exposure expanded their virtual social network.

Sometimes stories do not change beliefs but increase individuals' acceptance of new norms and norm-aligned behaviors. When the bloody civil war in Rwanda ended, a field experiment tested the power of storytelling as part of postwar reconciliation efforts by airing two radio soap operas across Rwanda (Paluck 2009). Some regions heard a radio story about two fictional Rwandan communities locked in violence. That storyline paralleled the history of Rwanda leading up to the 1994 genocide, with one important difference. In the soap opera, some characters banded together

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across ethnic lines, spoke out against powerful leaders who advocated violence, and supported an interethnic romance. Other parts of Rwanda heard a radio soap opera on a topic unrelated to intergroup conflict. Listeners of the conflict-and-reconciliation soap opera compared to the control group became more willing to dissent, talk about sensitive topics, accept interethnic marriages, and cooperate with the other side, even though their private beliefs did not change.

Story sharing has been found to create social glue within communities (Ramasubramanian 2016). People's connection to a storytelling network in their neighborhood is a strong predictor of feelings of belonging—the belief that their neighbors will band together to solve collective problems—and of civic participation (Kim & Ball-Rokeach 2006). Being connected to a storytelling network is particularly important in ethnically diverse communities where people move often across neighborhoods, cities, and states.

Stories in mass media convey the status hierarchy of groups. Stories told through mass media convey group status in two ways: through disparities in the numeric representation of social groups and through the quality and centrality of their representation. While popular media provide abundant, positive, and varied representations of some groups (e.g., people who are White, middle-class, and men), for others (e.g., racial ethnic minorities, women, sexual minorities) media representations are less abundant and their roles are more limited, caricatured, or negative (Leavitt et al. 2015, Scharrer et al. 2022). According to 2003 casting data, White actors dominate 73.5% of all roles in film and TV, Black actors occupied 15.3% of roles, and Latinos and Asian Americans occupied 5.4% and 2.5% of roles, respectively (Screen Actors Guild 2004). News stories about crime are more likely to portray White people as the good guys and Black and Hispanics as the suspects or perpetrators (Dixon 2015, Dixon & Azocar 2007, Dixon & Linz 2000). In relation to gender, approximately 60% of characters in broadcast and cable TV are male and 40% are female (Scharrer et al. 2022, Sink & Mastro 2017). In children's media, two-thirds of characters are male (González et al. 2020, Hentges & Case 2013, Walsh & Leaper 2020).

Skewed group representations in the media landscape correlate with individual-level attitudes and beliefs. A large content analysis compared ethnic representation in popular US TV shows over more than 20 years with Americans' racial attitudes during the same period. The results revealed that the quantity and quality of ethnic media representations were associated with White Americans' racial attitudes (Tukachinsky et al. 2015). In relation to gender, a meta-analysis found that exposure to popular TV shows was strongly associated with decade-long stable attitudes toward traditional gender roles in domestic life but weakly and variably associated with attitudes toward gender roles at work (Hermann et al. 2022).

Media popularity can be intentionally leveraged to increase inclusion. For example, media exposure to the stories of admired members of disadvantaged groups who defy stereotypes significantly reduces implicit and explicit stereotypes and prejudice (Dasgupta & Asgari 2004, Dasgupta & Greenwald 2001, Dasgupta & Rivera 2008, Kurdi et al. 2024, Ramasubramanian 2015, Schiappa et al. 2005). Viewers exposed to images of famous Black and infamous White Americans exhibited less implicit race bias compared to others exposed to famous White and infamous Black Americans or to a control condition (Dasgupta & Greenwald 2001), and this result persisted 24 hours later. A recent replication 25 years later, in a noisier media landscape, found that such media exposure works only when observers notice the connection between race and valence (Kurdi et al. 2024) (see the sidebar titled How Individual Stories Increase Understanding of Structural Inequality).

Leveraging stories to illustrate systemic barriers. A rare study illustrated how stories affect people's understanding of systemic barriers by examining Americans' understanding of undocumented immigration. Most people's knowledge comes from the media, where undocumented migrants are often portrayed as gang members seeking to spread crime in the United States or

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HOW INDIVIDUAL STORIES INCREASE UNDERSTANDING OF STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY

Stories are likely to be an effective tool to illuminate the multiple causes of systemic inequalities because they foster greater understanding about the lives of people different from oneself and reveal patterns across individual experiences. In contrast, explaining social problems using statistics and abstract language often fails to engage the audience, as shown by several meta-analyses (Braddock & Dillard 2016, Oschatz & Marker 2020).

as unaccompanied minors manipulated by traffickers. Both narratives exaggerate real statistics tracked by the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS). When migrants are assumed to have criminal intent, people are more likely to support antimigrant policies. Personal stories can be a powerful corrective here. A study used a news story showing an emotional reunion between a mother and child, both undocumented migrants, seeking asylum in the United States to escape domestic violence (Moore-Berg et al. 2022). After being separated at the US border for weeks, they were finally reunited. Researchers tested whether watching the tearful mother-and-daughter reunion would arouse empathy and shape opinions about immigration policy. Democrats and Republicans were randomly assigned into one of four groups. One group watched the video and was asked to guess the proportion of undocumented migrants who were gang members or pawns of human traffickers. A second group watched the same video, answered the same questions, and was then shown federal DHS statistics to illustrate the gap between their guess and reality. The third group only read the DHS statistics. The final group saw nothing at all. Then, all participants were asked how they felt about separating parents and children at the border, their attitudes toward undocumented migrants, and their opinions about immigration policies. Providing Americans with a video narrative showing the suffering of real migrants together with corrective information worked better than all other interventions. These two pieces of information humanized the plight of undocumented migrants, induced empathy, neutralized misinformation, and increased opposition to antimigrant policy. While the video alone without corrective statistical information increased empathy, it did not change policy opinions, and merely providing immigration statistics did nothing. To move opinions about immigration policy, one needs personal stories plus accurate information.

This research shows that stories frame people's understanding of social reality. Well-told stories of people and unfamiliar issues reduce negative attitudes and increase empathy. While some research shows that stories influence policy preferences, this type of research is sparse. More work is needed to determine the extent to which stories impact behavioral choices (e.g., voting, policy choices) and ideological positions (e.g., beliefs about meritocracy). A second gap in existing research literature concerns the relation between people's reactions to stories of individual struggle and their understanding of systemic inequalities that produce those struggles as well as their support for social reforms.

Seeing High-Status People and Their Group Membership Legitimizes or Challenges Inequality

We learn what status means by noticing who is valued, respected, and popular in our local culture and who is missing from these pedestals. This is the fourth type of situational nudge (or metaphorical wallpaper). Status is signaled by individuals' observable characteristics—their accents, names, and presence in popular media—that are taken to mean they also possess unobserved desirable qualities. The desirable characteristics of individuals get generalized to other members of their

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group. Observers infer that people who belong to the same group also possess similar desirable attributes and, conversely, that people from different groups possess fewer desirable attributes. People with high status are assumed to deserve symbolic resources (respect, influence, power, valued roles) and material resources (jobs, opportunities, wealth).

Accent as a marker of status. How people speak—their accent, pronunciation, and speech cadence—signals their status and is part of the cultural wallpaper (Fuertes et al. 2012, Gluszek & Dovidio 2010). There is an accent hierarchy in the United States and in English-speaking countries colonized by the British. English spoken with a British accent is globally perceived as occupying the top of the hierarchy. In the United States, people speaking with a Standard American accent (or Broadcast English) are assumed to be most cultured, upper-class, and intelligent; this is the standard against which other accents are judged (Dovidio & Gluszek 2012, Hideg et al. 2024, Levon et al. 2021).

Accent is interpreted as a legitimate proxy for status, worthiness, and intelligence, even though in reality it is an arbitrary feature of speech. Listeners make inferences about a person's social class based on their accent within seconds, which in turn affects their inferences about the speaker's intelligence and employability (Hideg et al. 2024, Kraus et al. 2019, Levon et al. 2021). For instance, research volunteers listened to audio recordings of individuals from a range of social class backgrounds making short introductory remarks prior to a job interview; no additional information was given about their qualifications (Kraus et al. 2019). Participants evaluated candidates who spoke with upper-class accents to be more competent and hirable; they recommended higher starting salaries and signing bonuses for them compared to others whose accents sounded less upper-class. The assumption that accent and the social class it signals are accurate indicators of unobserved talent and potential is a major roadblock to fairness and meritocracy.

Nationality as a marker of status. Being American is a marker of high status in many parts of the world; but who is seen as authentically American? Two answers compete for attention in the national discourse on this issue. Sometimes Americanness is defined in terms of shared values among citizens (e.g., reverence for individual freedom and democracy and service to one's community and nation), while at other times it is defined in terms of European ethnic ancestry (i.e., real Americans are White). A growing body of social psychological research shows that observable attributes like race are often used as a proxy to infer American nationality (Devos & Mohamed 2014, Yogeeswaran & Dasgupta 2014, Zou & Cheryan 2017). People assume that White people are more American than Black, Asian, and Hispanic people, even if the latter are native-born Americans (Devos & Banaji 2005, Devos et al. 2010). These assumptions are observed both when nationality beliefs are measured unobtrusively and through self-reports (Devos & Mohamed 2014). This racialized stereotype of Americanness exists despite the long history of immigration that shaped the United States and continues to feed its population.

The implicit belief that Whites are more authentic Americans than Asians has downstream effects on employment. A pair of experiments conducted by Yogeeswaran & Dasgupta (2010) measured the extent to which research volunteers implicitly associated Americanness with race. Their opinions about the patriotism of various ethnic groups were also measured. A week later, the same participants participated in an allegedly different study where they evaluated multiple job candidates, all native-born Americans, for a job at the US National Security Agency. Applicants' race was implied through Chinese-sounding or English-sounding names on their resume, while their qualifications remained identical. The results revealed that the more strongly participants implicitly associated American symbols with White faces, the more they doubted Asian Americans' patriotism, which in turn predicted their rejection of qualified Asian American job candidates and their preference for hiring White candidates. Hiring bias occurred only for the national security

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job but not for an identical job in the corporate world, suggesting that anti-Asian employment discrimination was driven by doubts about Asian Americans' patriotism and not by a generalized form of discrimination.

Other experiments showed that the psychological boundaries of Americanness can be expanded to include non-White Americans if viewers see information that emphasizes individuals' service to the nation (Yogeeswaran et al. 2012). However, when these experiments emphasized individuals' ethnic identity instead, it made those individuals and their entire group appear foreign. Public expressions of ethnic identity increased Americans' concern that US culture was being diluted by foreign influences, which in turn strengthened their implicit conviction that Americans are White (Yogeeswaran et al. 2011). In sum, observable forms of ethnic identity are used by observers as proxies for implicitly granting American nationality to some while denying that status to others, which leads to downstream biases.

Names as a marker of status. Names signal a person's membership in particular racial, gender, caste, or religious groups, which activates group-based stereotypes and influences hiring managers' judgments of who is meritorious and hirable. In a field experiment, researchers sent résumés from fictitious job seekers in response to help-wanted advertisements (Bertrand & Mullainathan 2004). The résumés sent to each job posting were virtually identical except that some had names popular among White Americans while others had names popular among African Americans. Applicants with White-sounding names received 50% more interview callbacks than applicants with Black-sounding names, despite having equal qualifications. A meta-analysis of more than 13,000 job applicants revealed that the names on résumés also impacted actual job offers made by hiring managers. White-sounding applicants received 53% more callbacks for interviews and 145% more actual job offers than Black-sounding applicants with similar skills (Quillian et al. 2020; see also Kang et al. 2010).

This type of hiring bias is observed in other countries as well. In Sweden, hiring managers who exhibited more implicit (but not explicit) preference for native-born Swedes over Muslims were more likely to invite candidates with native Swedish names for job interviews than candidates with Muslim names (Rooth 2010). In India, where names often signal religious caste, hiring managers invited more candidates with upper-caste names to interview for customer service jobs than candidates with lower-caste names, despite equal qualifications (Banerjee et al. 2009) (see the sidebar titled How Observable Markers of Status Associated with Individuals Lead to Structural Inequality).

The absence of status markers raises self-doubt about belonging. Individuals from lower-status groups who do not possess status markers worry about their belonging in college and in professional workplaces where status markers are treated as proxies for talent and

HOW OBSERVABLE MARKERS OF STATUS ASSOCIATED WITH INDIVIDUALS LEAD TO STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY

Observable characteristics like accent, name, and nationality are used by individual decision-makers to sort people into high- and low-status groups. Such categorizations lead to differential inferences about talent, competence, and deservingness based on group membership despite equal qualifications, leading to unearned advantages. Even slightly biased judgments by different decision-makers may add up over time, increasing the gap between people who possess valued status markers and those who do not and pushing their trajectories in increasingly unequal directions.

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potential—an experience called social identity threat (Dasgupta 2011, Emerson & Murphy 2014, Spencer et al. 2016, Steele et al. 2002, Thiem & Dasgupta 2022). Social identity threat shakes individuals' confidence (Cozzarelli & Major 1990, Ewing et al. 1996, Kumar & Jagacinski 2006, Thompson et al. 1998), reduces behavioral engagement (Dasgupta et al. 2015, Stout et al. 2011), and interferes with performance (Spencer et al. 2016).

The presence of successful ingroup members increases belonging, persistence, and success. Seeing successful members of disadvantaged groups in high-achievement environments enhances the experience of novices who share their identity (Thiem & Dasgupta 2022), increasing their sense of belonging, self-efficacy, motivation, and career aspirations (Dasgupta 2011, Dasgupta & Asgari 2004, Stout et al. 2011). Belonging, persistence, self-directed career preparation, and psychological well-being are preserved when novices have near-peer mentors who belong to their identity group during college transition as compared to mentors from other identity groups (Dennehy & Dasgupta 2017, Wu et al. 2022). The benefits of having ingroup peer mentors during the transition to college persist for many years, long after the mentoring relationships have ended (Wu et al. 2024).

Seeing people who look like oneself in an organization matters to job-seekers and to customers considering the organization's services. Organizations draw attention to their values in many ways—through mission statements as well as by showcasing their employees, products, and services. From the perspective of Black applicants, seeing the diversity of employees in an organization is more important to foster trust and belonging than reading diversity mission statements of that organization (Purdie-Vaughn et al. 2008, Wilton et al. 2020). Similarly, seeing diverse clientele at medical providers induces more trust among lesbian, gay, and transgender people than reading the providers' diversity-oriented mission statements (Cipollina & Sanchez 2022).

Given that observable markers of status like accent, name, nationality, and degrees from elite institutions are used as proxies for unobserved talent, educating hiring managers, admissions officers, and selection committees is surely important. Yet there is little research showing that bias awareness training improves fairness in hiring and admission decisions [Arslan et al. (2025) is an exception]. This is a critical avenue for future research. If traditional training does not work, might other strategies (e.g., elevating stories of successful individuals who do not possess typical status markers) disrupt the heavy reliance on status markers to judge talent? For example, the profiles of less visible people and voices within organizations or communities could be elevated by featuring their stories in the media accompanied by tests to determine whether story prominence shifts attitudes toward these individuals and their groups, assumptions about meritocracy, and community norms. This is a promising area for future research. Another option is to explore whether changes in social norms or decision-making processes increase fairness in hiring and admission.

CONCLUSION

Using an interdisciplinary approach, this article illuminates the mechanisms of culture change by zeroing in on the power of situations that nudge social contexts either toward greater inclusion and equality or away from it. Four types of situational features are highlighted that shift people's beliefs, motivations, and behaviors incrementally, moving from the individual level to influence interpersonal relationships, which in turn influence culture change at a local level. These situational features are often in the background and rarely attract attention, much like the wallpaper in a room. After guiding readers to notice these situational nudges through a guided review of existing research, this article shows how their negative impacts can be counteracted and positive ones can be harnessed using science-backed solutions. For each type of wallpaper, I point to gaps in the research base where empirical evidence is thin or lacking to chart an agenda for future research.

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SUMMARY POINTS

Four wrong assumptions have been guiding many culture change efforts:

1. Individuals are assumed to be the primary agents of change.
2. Belief change is assumed to be a prerequisite for subsequent behavior change.
3. Facts are assumed to be the best way to raise awareness of inequality and motivate change.
4. Diversity, equity, and inclusion practices have prioritized identity-based representation with less attention to people's relationships across lines of group identity and across roles of differential power and status.

Four types of situational forces shift local cultures toward equality or away from it:

1. The physical design of local environments can either promote inclusion and equality or reduce it by influencing who interacts with whom, how relationships form, and who gains access to information networks.
2. Knowledge of norms, expectations, rule-bending, and skills needed to meet the demands of local cultures accelerates social mobility; the unequal distribution of such knowledge creates inequality.
3. Popular stories circulating through word-of-mouth and the media elevate a set of values and ideologies that either normalize social hierarchy or question its legitimacy; stories train listeners' mindset and guide their behaviors toward equality or away from it.
4. The diversity or homogeneity of people in admired and respected roles signals whether social mobility is open to all or limited to some.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author is not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article is adapted from the book *Change the Wallpaper: Transforming Cultural Patterns to Build More Just Communities* (Dasgupta 2025). While the book was written for a general nonacademic audience, this article presents a more scholarly, in-depth treatment of the same subject. Thanks to Alan J. Simon for his thoughtful feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript and to Monica Iriti and Swara Rao for their editorial support.

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